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FOOD SAFETY STRESSED DURING BAD WEATHER, OTHER EMERGENCIES

FRANKFORT, KY. (6-02-04) The Cabinet for Health and Family Services wants to caution Kentuckians about some of the dangers affecting food safety that can arise during weather conditions such as floods, tornadoes or severe storms

"During severe storms, power outages may cause problems with frozen or refrigerated foods in residential freezers and refrigerators," said Anita Travis, Manager of the Cabinet's Food Safety Branch. "Refrigeration units and freezers containing foods such as meats, poultry, dairy products, butter, cheese, eggs, fish, and cooked vegetables may not maintain refrigerated-frozen temperatures over a long period." Travis said these foods, which can be hazardous if not kept at proper temperature, must be kept cold or frozen to protect the products from spoilage.

Here are some general guidelines:

- Do not open the freezer or refrigerator to check contents, as cooling loss occurs rapidly and safe storage time will be reduced. Cover these appliances with blankets or other insulating materials to reduce cooling loss. Modern refrigerators will maintain safe food temperatures without electrical power for two to four hours if kept closed. Beyond that time, any foods which are not ready to eat or which cannot be fully cooked before eating that contain meat, fish, poultry, eggs, milk, etc., should be discarded to prevent food-borne illness. Adequate refrigeration temperatures should be 45 degrees Fahrenheit or colder.
- Unopened freezers will maintain foods at safe temperatures for two to four days depending on freezer size and whether full or partially full, although thawing will occur. If power is restored during this time period, transfer thawed foods to the refrigerator and use promptly; if power is not restored, use only fresh ready-to-eat foods or foods that you are able to cook immediately, which have not been contaminated by leakage of other thawed foods. Otherwise foods should be discarded.
- Do not eat potentially hazardous food products which have been exposed to temperatures above 45 degrees Fahrenheit for more than two to four hours, or if there is the slightest hint of "off odor."

- Sealed food containers such as canned goods that have been subjected to flood waters or which have been soiled by wind, rain, or splash may be cleaned by washing in soapy water, rinsing with clean water and sanitizing in a solution of household bleach and warm water. The bleach solution should consist of one tablespoon of bleach in two gallons of water. Containers that have been washed may rust if not used right away unless coated with mineral oil or cooking oil. Containers with pull-tabs or screw-on or pressed-on lids that have been splashed or submerged in contaminated water should not be saved, as contamination is not easily removed from crevices under the pull-tabs or lids.

Flooding due to recent rains may cause contamination of private or well water supplies. For possible disinfection of the water you may mix a solution of 2 quarts of regular unscented 5.25% house hold bleach (chlorine) with 2 gallons of water and pour this solution into the well. Allow the well to stand idle for 12-24 hours. Open faucets and run water until a chlorine odor is noticeable. If you are in doubt about the safety of your water supply, please resort to bottled water from an approved source for your drinking water purposes.

- Follow the rule, “when in doubt, throw it out” for any foods which you are not sure have stayed at safe temperatures or which do not look or smell as they should. Other food items not requiring refrigeration should be thoroughly inspected prior to consumption. For more information, call your local health department or the Food Safety Branch in Frankfort at 502/564-7181.